

# Give children diverse programming

**MICHAEL REISCH**

Children's advocate

The Federal Communications Commission is in the midst of an unprecedented review of our country's TV and radio ownership laws, with one of the only public hearings on the issue taking place today at the University of Washington.

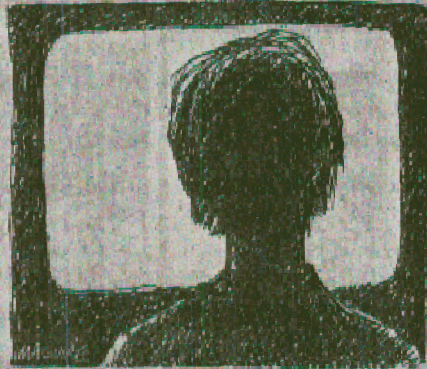
While FCC Chairman Michael K. Powell has called this review "comprehensive," the unique needs of our nation's children have so far remained on the periphery of the debate. Powell has described the current landscape as one "overflowing" with programming choices. This flood of entertainment and news programming, however, turns to a mere trickle as it winds its way toward our children.

It is clear that we must adjust our media policies to the changing technological and economic realities of the 21st century. If these policies are to be socially responsible, we must not only consider the implications for media corporations, broadcasters and adult viewers but for children as well.

Research shows that broadcast television is overwhelmingly the primary media source for children. Surveys conducted by Children Now have found that children want programming that reflects the diverse world in which they live. Other research demonstrates the effect the media have on kids' healthy development. Therefore, any media policy designed to address competition, diversity or localism must be examined in relation to how it will impact the child audience.

Media ownership rules must preserve vigorous competition to ensure that children have access to different sources of programming. Otherwise, innovative children's programming will be stifled while commercialism in programming design and content, which polls show greatly concerns parents, likely will increase.

Existing media consolidation already has resulted in diminishing the number of producers creating programming for children, as well as adults. In 1970, 20 studios or production houses supplied 68 percent of all prime time programming. By 2002, just 10 studios programmed 88 percent of prime time, according to a recent study conducted by the FCC.



In addition, the growing practice of broadcast stations repeating children's programming that first airs on cable, and vice versa, has already significantly diminished the diversity of programs available to kids.

Once cable and broadcast networks produced original children's programs. Now, the same programming often is shared among networks, especially by those owned by the same corporation. For example, Nickelodeon programming repeats on corporate sibling CBS; ABC airs shows from other Disney-owned channels; and the Cartoon Network borrows programs from Kids WB, both owned by AOL Time Warner.

FCC Chairman Powell claims that viewers have more choices and control than ever. But much of this "overflow" is in fact the same programming repeated multiple times.

A troubling development in traditional Saturday morning kids' programming is the subleasing of those hours by companies not licensed to serve the public interest. For example, Fox's four-year, \$100 million deal with 4 Kids Entertainment raises particular concerns because the latter is a toy licensing company that has the right to retain all revenue from network advertising sales. Such trends could ultimately undermine broadcasters' compliance with the Children's Television Act, which mandates that broadcasters air a minimum three hours per week of "informational/educational" children's programs, among other requirements.

Media consolidation also has limited the amount of local programming available for and about children. Media ownership rules are necessary to preserve and promote more local

news and public affairs programs that report on children and the important issues that affect their lives, such as stories on unique educational, health, economic and cultural issues within their communities.

Research by the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School and others indicates that locally produced, quality children's and public affairs programming is a vital component of expanding children's civic education and participation. Quality children's educational programming requires extra effort and resources.

Commercial broadcasters have historically neglected the needs of children unless required to do so by law. In other words, when broadcasters are left to their own devices, kids lose out. (Remember when broadcasters claimed "The Jetsons" and "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles" were "educational" programs?)

Instead, the production of children's television should be driven by the same public interest that broadcasters have promised to uphold in exchange for access to our valuable publicly owned airwaves. Close monitoring and enforcement of these public interest obligations by the FCC is required.

The media ownership rules that the FCC is reviewing determine the extent to which the marketplace will foster or impede the development of programs containing community-specific content, innovation in educational programs and diversity in the flow of ideas to future generations of children. The FCC must ensure that broadcasters provide children with innovative and diverse content, as well as locally appropriate programming.

In January this year, Children Now submitted extensive comments to the FCC detailing the special needs and interests of children. In coalition with public health, media and parents' organizations, we asked that the FCC continue to uphold its historical duty to protect the child audience. Before relaxing or eliminating existing media ownership rules, the commission must consider the implications of such sweeping changes on children's programming.

Michael Reisch is president of Children Now, a child research and action organization based in Oakland, Calif. Comments can be made to the FCC and members of Congress at [www.childrennow.org](http://www.childrennow.org)